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ABSTRACT

A study explored the differences in consumer perceptions of product attributes for national brand and generic grocery products as they related to the frequency of generic purchases. It was hypothesized that consumers perceive national brands more favorably than they do generics, but that the more frequently they purchase generics, the more favorable their perceptions of generics become. Data were collected from a telephone survey of 205 households in an eastern United States community. Items used to measure consumer perceptions were based on a 10-point rating scale, and included attributes such as label information, taste, nutritional value, and variety of choice. The results indicated that generics were equally popular among most demographic groups with regard to perceptions or purchase frequency and that generics were rated less favorably than national brands in all attributes except price. Almost half the respondents purchased generics occasionally, with the remainder evenly split between those who never purchase generics and those who buy them regularly. Findings also showed that the more frequently consumers purchased generics, the more favorably they perceived both the price, taste, and other attributes of generics and the overall quality of generics relative to national brands. The results suggested that price is not the only attribute consumers consider when evaluating generic products. (HTH)

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ADVERTISING DIVISION

GENERICS VERSUS NATIONAL BRANDS: AN EXAMINATION OF FREQUENCY OF PURCHASE AND CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

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Presented to the Advertising Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, National Convention, Gainesville, Florida, August, 1984.

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ABSTRACT

GENERICS VERSUS NATIONAL BRANDS: AN EXAMINATION OF FREQUENCY OF PURCHASE AND CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

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Generic products are capturing an increasing market share in the United States. The reasons for their growth have been the subject of considerable recent research, and are the focus of the present study. Using survey data, we examine differences in consumer perceptions of generics and national brands, testing their relationship to the frequency of purchase of generics.

We find that while generics are generally seen as inferior to national brands (price being the only exception), generics are seen in an increasingly favorable light relative to national brands as purchase frequency increases. A number of alternative theoretical explanations for this are examined, including the role of advertising and selective perception.

Presented to the Advertising Division, Assocation for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication National Convention, Gainesville, Florida, August, 1984.

INTRODUCTION

Since their U.S. introduction in 1977, generic products have enjoyed a high rate of growth--often at the expense of sales volume for national and store brand products (Progressive Grocer, 1978, 1982; Business Week, 1982; Marketing News, 1982; Faria, 1981). Cunningham, Hardy and Imperia (1982), for example, note that for over 100 product categories, generic unit sales have more than doubled in recent years, while sales volume for national and store brands in those same categories has decreased over three percent.

This growing consumer demand for the "no frills" generic alternatives has not gone unnoticed. In fact, numerous articles in both professional and scholarly publications have been directed at examining this marketing phenomenon (Burck, 1979; Cox, 1978; Jackson, 1978; Nevils and Sundel, 1979; Granzin, 1981; Hopkins, 1978; Resnick, Turney and Mason, 1979; Kono and Bernacchi, 1980). Much of the research to date has focused on whether a difference exists between users of generic products and users of brand name items. Cunningham et al. (1982) found that generic purchasers tend to be younger and better educated than national brand users. Granzin and Schjelderup (1980) have found similar results. Others have found that unlike private brands, generics tend to fair equally well among all income groups (Burck 1979; Zbytneiwski and Heller, 1979; Strange, Harris and Hernandez, 1979; Burger and Scott, 1972; Frank, 1967; Myers, 1967; Rao, 1969).

Cunningham et al. (1982) found differences between generic and national brand users in the reasons they gave for making a product choice. For example, generic users tended to mention price, while national brand users cited quality as their primary reason for choosing a particular brand (in this case, canned food). Notably, when product attribute perceptions were examined, national brand users saw no significant difference in price between national and generic

brands. This, of course, is an inaccurate perception. Generics do, in fact, differ in a number of ways from their private brand competitors--price and lack of advertising being perhaps the most significant differences (other differences include appearance, size, uniformity and packaging).

Based on their findings, Cunningham et al. (1982) conclude that price may be a relatively unimportant attribute for national brand users. They further suggest that attributes other than price and quality may be better suited to predict perceptual differences among national and generic users of each brand of product. The validity of this conclusion, however, must be questioned. It would seem just as likely that price is still an important factor (albeit secondary to quality), and, as a result, national brand users tend to selectively perceive the price of generics as equal to that of national brands--in order to justify, or rationalize, their purchase behavior (and thus avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)).

Price, or the consumer's perception of it, may also play an important role in determining consumer perceptions of other product attributes, as well as purchasing decisions (Bellizzi and Martin, 1982; Jacoby et al., 1971; Jacoby, 1972; Jacoby et al., 1974; Jacoby et al., 1977; Imperia, 1981; Olson and Stokes, 1973). For example, a number of researchers have found that price can interact with other informational cues, such as brand familiarity or store image, thus serving as a basis for judging product quality (Monroe, 1976; Olson, 1977; Wheatley and Chiu, 1977).

Bellizzi, Hamilton, Krueckeberg and Martin (1981) have also studied the differences in consumer perceptions of national, private and generic brands, concluding that consumers see national brands as generally superior to generics. In particular, national brands are seen as superior in terms of reliability, prestige, quality, color, texture, uniformity, appeal, confidence, package

attraction, and package persuasion.

The issue of perceived quality of generics is one that has not been fully resolved. For example, while Bellizzi et al. (1981) found a significant difference in the perceived quality of generics overall, Murphy and Laczniak (1979) found that consumers believe generics to be of comparable quality to private brands. A study by Strange, Harris and Hernandez (1979) suggested that non-triers of generics report lower quality perceptions of generics than triers. Zbytniewski (1979) found that males tend to have a more favorable perception of generics than females.

Purpose of Study

In the present study, we expand upon the differences between generic and national brands that researchers such as Cunningham et al. (1982) have found. Specifically, we focus on the differences consumers perceive in product attributes for national and generic grocery food products, as they relate to the frequency with which respondents purchase generic products. We are using frequency of generic product purchase as a predictor variable for a number of reasons, including its usefulness in understanding consumer perceptions in other research contexts. But, perhaps more importantly, we feel that valuable insights into the psychology of consumer decision making may be gained by examining perceptions in the context of different frequency levels, rather than types of brand users. In other words, most consumers have at one time or another purchased generics. We wish to shed some light on why some consumers never have purchased generics, why some purchase them only occasionally, and why some do so regularly. Some research, for example, has indicated a certain level of brand loyalty among generic users (Faria, 1979).

Hypotheses

Based on the preceding conceptualization and literature review, the following hypotheses have been developed.

H1: Consumers perceive national brands more favorably than generics.

H2: The more frequent the purchase of generics, the more favorable the perceptions of generics.

H3: The more frequent the purchase of generics, the more favorable the consumer's perceptions of generics relative to brands.

For reasons of parsimony, we decided not to examine perceptions of private brands, since they are not central to our research question and have been fairly well researched already (Bellizzi et al., 1981; Cunningham et al. 1982; Kleppner, 1979; Newman and Becknell, 1970; Tull, Boring and Gonsior, 1964; Applebaum and Goldberg, 1967).

For similar reasons, we decided to examine perceptions of only grocery food items, rather than all generic product categories, such as prescription drugs, etc. As Cunningham et al. (1982) have argued, this strategy will help eliminate any biases related to product types, as caused by different product characteristics.

Methodology

Research Design and Sampling Plan

Data for this study were collected via a cross-sectional telephone survey of 205 adult residents of a central Pennsylvania community of about 35,000. The 205 completed interviews represents a completion rate of 51% (405 numbers were originally selected) and a response rate of 74.5% (there were 275 eligible households; businesses or student households were considered ineligible). Interviews were conducted by trained student interviewers during a one-week period of the fall of 1983. Telephone numbers were selected from the local telephone directory using a systematic interval sampling technique. We felt that this technique would provide us with a fairly representative sample of the community's adult population since there are few households that have unlisted phone numbers (fewer than 16% of all households) or do not have a phone (fewer than 4%)(Survey Sampling, Inc., 1982).

Respondents were selected from each household using the next birthday method developed by Salmon and Nichols (1983). This method has been tested by a number of other researchers (Pavlik, 1983) and has been found to provide excellent results with a minimum cost.

Measurement

The questionnaire was designed to measure several things, including demographic characteristics of the respondents, consumer perceptions of generic and national brands of grocery food items, and frequency of product purchase rates.

Items used to measure consumer perceptions were based on rating scales of 1-10, ranging from poor to excellent. Attributes measured were: taste,

appearance, package size, nutritional value, performance, availability, label information, and variety of choice.

Frequency of purchase was measured by asking respondents how often in the past year they have purchased a generic food product. Responses were categorized into levels of once a week or more, once every two weeks, once a month, once a year, or never.

Findings

Sample Characteristics

Based on the characteristics of our respondents, we feel we have obtained a fairly representative sample. Slightly over half of our sample are female (56.6%). Most of the respondents were in the age groups of 25-34 (25.9%) or 35-49 (35.1%). A fifth (20%) were 50 or older and the remainder were either 22-24 (13.7%) or 18-21 (5.4%). Most of the respondents were married (71%). About two-thirds (66.8%) of our subjects work for pay outside the home, with the majority of them (79.1%) being employed full time.

With regard to education, the largest portions of our sample were either high school graduates (32.8%) or college graduates (27.5%). Slightly smaller percentages had either some college (20.6%) or post-college work (15.2%). The remainder (4%) had less than a high school degree.

In terms of income, our subjects were fairly evenly distributed across the levels of $15,000-19,999 (19.3%), $20,000-24,999 (18.3%), $25,000-34,000 (20.3%) and $35,000 or more (24.3%). The remainder had incomes of $10,000-14,999 (11.4%) or under $10,000 (6.4%).

While our sample seems somewhat better educated and wealthier than the U.S. norm, it is nevertheless representative of the community from which the sample was selected. The community is a predominantely white collar one.

As a side note, we should mention that these demographic variables were analyzed in relationship to our measures of purchase frequency and product perceptions. Our findings were largely consistent with previous research (Burck, 1979). Generics seem to be equally popular among most demographic groups--with regard to perceptions or purchase frequency. In fact, one of the only patterns that seemed to emerge was a slightly higher purchase frequency

among women than men--but this was not statistically significant.

Test of First Hypothesis:

The first hypothesis stated that consumers, in general, would perceive national brands more favorably than generics. This hypothesis is tested in two ways. First of all, we conducted a t-test directly comparing overall evaluations of national and generic brands. Overall evaluations consist of the sum of a consumer's reported rating of each brand category along several dimensions. These dimensions are those listed in the preceeding measurement section. The results of this first test are presented in table 1.

These data clearly support our first hypothesis. Consumers do rate national brands more favorably than generics. In fact, on a scale of 0-90 (0 being poor on every attribute, 90 being excellent on every attribute, and 45 being "average"), national brands received a mean score of 69. Meanwhile, generics received a mean score of just 49. This indicates that in an absolute sense, generics are seen as about average in quality overall, while national brands are seen as typically quite good. It should be noted that we examined the independence of these two scales in order to be sure respondents were not simply answering via a "response set". We found that while there are significant correlations between the overall scales, as well as their individual attributes, most correlations are quite small (largest correlation about .3; see table 2).

To adequately test the first hypothesis also requires us to examine consumer perceptions of generic and national brands along each of the dimensions used in the above scale. Table 1 presents the results of t-tests used to compare consumers perceptions on these attributes. These data indicate that with the sole exception of price, generics are rated less favorably than

TABLE 1

Differences in Consumer Perceptions of National Brands and Generics

Variable	N of Cases	Mean	Stnd Dev.	* Diff.	T Value	DF	2-Tail Prob.
Overall							
Generic		49.6	15.37	*			
	194			* -18.97	-16.29	193	0.000
Brand		68.6	9.57	*			
Taste							
Generic		5.81	2.31	*			
	199			* -2.75	-16.10	198	0.000
Brand		8.56	1.07	*			
Appearance							
Generic		4.79	2.51	*			
	199			* -3.26	-17.31	198	0.000
Brand		8.05	1.40	*			
Size							
Generic		5.50	2.29	*			
	198			* -1.52	-8.68	197	0.000
Brand		7.02	1.86	*			
Price							
Generic		8.02	2.03	*			
	198			* 2.06	9.41	197	0.000
Brand		5.95	2.26	*			
Nutritional Value							
Generic		6.02	2.29	*			
	198			* -1.61	-8.78	197	0.000
Brand		7.63	1.72	*			
Performance							
Generic		5.47	2.24	*			
	196			* -2.12	-11.95	195	0.000
Brand		7.60	1.59	*			
Availability							
Generic		5.30	2.33	*			
	199			* -3.00	-14.94	198	0.000
Brand		8.31	1.49	*			
Label Information							
Generic		4.51	2.56	*			
	196			* -2.98	-15.43	195	0.000
Brand		7.49	1.93	*			
Variety of Choice							
Generic		4.25	2.43	*			
	198			* -3.71	-17.35	197	0.000
Brand		7.96	1.80	*			

TABLE 2

Inter-correlations Among Scale Items

Variable	N of Cases	Correlation	Probability
Overall Generic Brand	194	0.220	0.002
Taste Generic Brand	199	0.137	0.053
Appearance Generic Brand	199	0.171	0.016
Size Generic Brand	198	0.313	0.000
Price Generic Brand	198	-0.031	0.666
Nutritional Value Generic Brand	198	0.199	0.005
Performance Generic Brand	196	0.192	0.007
Availability Generic Brand	199	-0.050	0.481
Label Information Generic Brand	196	0.299	0.000
Variety of Choice Generic Brand	198	0.013	0.859

national brands. These results are consistent with most previous research (Cunningham, et al., 1981) and provide generally strong support for our first hypothesis.

Test of Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis states that the more frequent the purchase of generics, the more favorable the perceptions of generics. To test this hypothesis, requires an analysis of variance, with purchase frequency being treated as the independent variable and perception of generics the dependent variable. Purchase frequency is an ordinal level variable, with three distinct levels: nonpurchase of generics, occasional purchase (once every month or less), and regular purchase (more than once a month). For our sample, almost half (47.3%) were occasional purchasers, with the remainder evenly split between those who never purchase generics (26.8%), and those who buy them regularly (25.8%). Perceptions of generics is an interval level variable, which we also used in the test of the first hypothesis. On this measure, we found that consumers perceive generics to be of generally average quality (overall mean of 49), with price being the only highly favorable attribute (mean of 8 on a scale of 0-10).

The hypothesis was tested in two manners, each of which is presented in table 3. First, we tested the relationship overall, with a summated rating scale used as an indicator of overall perceptions of generics (same scale as in previous hypothesis test). These results clearly support our second hypothesis. The significant F-value indicates that frequency of purchase is significantly related to overall perceptions of generics. Examining each of the means for each level of the independent variable reinforces this conclusion by indicating a progressively higher mean perception of generics for each level of the

TABLE 3

Generic Ratings by Frequency of Generic Purchase

Product Characteristic	Non-Purchaser Mean	Occasional Purchaser Mean	Regular Purchaser Mean	F	Sig. of F
Overall	42.49	49.48	57.41	13.28	0.000
Taste	4.80	5.91	6.63	8.69	0.000
Appearance	4.08	4.76	5.57	4.74	0.010
Size	4.86	5.48	6.18	4.34	0.014
Price	7.29	8.07	8.63	5.87	0.003
Nut. Value	4.90	5.93	7.31	17.21	0.000
Performance	4.59	5.25	6.80	14.38	0.000
Availability	4.73	5.36	5.78	2.38	0.095
Label Info.	3.63	4.53	5.38	5.93	0.003
Var. of Choice	3.61	4.28	4.83	2.72	0.068

independent variable.

The second test of this hypothesis is to partition the dependent variable into each of its nine dimensions and then conduct multiple anovas. The results of this test are presented in table 3. Here again we find generally consistent support for our hypothesis. With the exception of variety of choice and availability of generics, we find that frequency of purchase is significantly related to each of the dimensions measured. That is, the more frequently a consumer purchases generics, the more favorable his/her perception of the price, taste, etc. of generics.

Test of Third Hypothesis

The third and final hypothesis of the study is the most important. It states that the more frequent the purchase of generics, the more favorable the consumer's perceptions of generics relative to brands. To adequately test this hypothesis again requires a 2-stage anova. First, we examined the relationship between purchase frequency and differences in perceptions overall. Then, we conducted anovas on each perceptual dimension. The dependent variable was measured using difference scores. These scores were computed by subtracting the consumer's rating of national brands from his/her rating of generics. This interval level variable had a potential range of -10 to +10, with higher scores indicating a more favorable attitude toward generics.

The results of the overall test are presented in table 4. Clearly, the results support our hypothesis. Purchase frequency is significantly related to a more favorable rating of generics relative to national brands. This, of course, comes as no surprise. The results of our second test, however, are much more illuminating.

As table 4 shows, it is not a simple case of purchase frequency being

TABLE 4

Mean Differences between Generic and National Brands
by Frequency of Generic Purchase

Product Characteristic	Non-Purchaser Mean	Occasional Purchaser Mean	Regular Purchaser Mean	F	Sig. of F
Overall	-26.69	-18.88	-11.05	12.98	0.000
Taste	-3.83	-2.64	-1.82	9.43	0.000
Appearance	-3.81	-3.28	-2.59	2.72	0.069
Size	-1.92	-1.57	-0.94	2.83	0.061
Price	0.67	2.02	3.51	12.12	0.000
Nut. Value	-2.83	-1.54	-0.45	12.34	0.000
Performance	-3.14	-2.13	-0.94	11.09	0.000
Availability	-3.63	-2.88	-2.53	1.92	0.150
Label Info.	-3.98	-2.78	-2.22	5.98	0.003
Var. of Choice	-4.23	-3.55	-3.41	1.06	0.349

significantly related to each dimension. Rather, the relationship holds for only the dimensions of price, nutritional value, performance, label information and taste. For each of the other attributes--availability, choice, size and appearance--higher levels of purchase frequency are not related to more favorable perceptions of generics relative to brands. In other words, regardless of purchase frequency, consumers see generics as uniformly inferior to national brands in terms of availability, choice, size (although the difference is slight here), and appearance. On the other hand, for the attributes of price, taste, nutritional value, performance and label information, generics are seen as faring consistently better at higher levels of purchase frequency. In fact, regular purchasers see no difference between generics and national brands with regard to nutritional value. Consumer perceptions of price are even more interesting. As the data show, nonpurchasers actually believe there to be no difference in the price of generics and national brands. This, of course, is an inaccurate perception, and is consistent with previous research (Cunningham et al., 1982). Occasional and regular purchasers see generics as superior to national brands in terms of price (i.e., generics are seen as less expensive).

Summary and Conclusions

The data presented in this paper tend to support our three basic hypotheses. First, we found clear support for our initial hypothesis that consumers would tend to see national food brands as superior to generic counterparts. This held consistently both overall and for specific attributes. In fact, the only exception was regarding price--an attribute on which generics are actually superior to private labels, on the average.

Our second hypothesis, that the more frequent the purchase of generics, the more favorable the perception of generics, was also upheld. Again, this was tested both overall and for each attribute measured. At the individual-attribute level, two exceptions emerged: variety of choice and availability.

Finally, the principal hypothesis of the study was also largely supported. This hypothesis stated that as frequency of generic purchase increased, generic brands would be seen in an increasingly favorable light, relative to national brands. This hypothesis, as a logical extension of the second hypothesis, provides a direct examination of generics versus brands. We found that for the attributes of price, nutritional value, performance, label information and taste, the more frequently one purchases generics, the more favorably one tends to perceive generics, relative to national brands. Importantly, however, there are four attributes for which this is not the case; specifically, availability, choice, size and appearance.

Taking a practical point of view, these results suggest that the generics market is not as simple as some might think. As we and others (Cunningham et al., 1981) have found, price is not the only attribute consumers consider when evaluating generic products. Moreover, for regular and even occasional purchasers, price may not even act as a significant compensating factor (i.e., a common assumption is that the lower price of generics tends to offset any

deficiences or other attributes). Rather, many generic users simply think there are no substantial differences between generics and national brands--other than marketing factors such as availability, choice, size and appearance--so why pay more just for a familiar name? The more difficult issue is how to convert the non-purchaser to an occasional or regular purchaser. The following discussion begins to address this issue.

From a theoretical perspective, we see three viable alternative causal explanations for these results. First, perceptions, however accurate or inaccurate, lead to purchase behavior (i.e., more favorable perceptions lead to more frequent purchases of generics). This is the most elementary and straightforward explanation of the three alternatives. It does, however, assume that consumers act in a very logical, rational manner--an assumption many researchers have brought into question. Second, purchase behavior leads one to selectively perceive generics. In other words, frequent purchase leads one to perceive generics as equal or superior to national brands. Conversely, infrequent or nonpurchase leads one to perceive generics as inferior to private brands in order to rationalize one's behavior. This model assumes that consumers are driven by a desire for internal consistency, somewhat akin to Festinger's (1957) notion of cognitive dissonance and Ray's (1974) dissonance-attribution hierarchy.

Finally, both perceptions and purchase behavior may be caused by a third factor: advertising. Advertising is one of the key ingredients lacking in the marketing of generics. It is possible that individuals who have had less exposure to advertising, or who have been less affected by its cumulative impact, hold more favorable attitudes toward generics and purchase them more frequently. Moreover, it may be that by trying generics, they have learned through experience that generics differ from brands in only a limited number of

ways. Conversely, those who have had high levels of exposure to advertising, or have been affected a great deal by advertising's cumulative effect, hold less favorable attitudes toward generics (and more favorable attitudes toward national brands) and purchase them less frequently or never.

This model, of course, assumes that advertising does have an effect, and possibly a cumulative (or multiplicative) one. The exact nature of the causal mechanism, however, is unclear. While we have suggested that it is the advertising messages themselves that create a more favorable image of national brands, it may be some other mechanism at work. For example, it may simply be that consumers feel that if a company spends millions each year on advertising, its product(s) must be very good.

While it is not possible with the present data for us to identify which of these causal perspectives best explains the observed relationship between purchase frequency and product perceptions, we feel that further research of a longitudinal nature would help answer this important question.

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